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ABSTRACT

Program providers who do not give refunds should reconsider their policies. Training providers should give all attendees the opportunity to express dissatisfaction, follow up on all complaints immediately and personally, and allow dissatisfied attendees to receive full or partial refunds or attend another session or program without additional cost. Besides doing whatever it takes to address the complaints of dissatisfied attendees, training providers should assess their programs to devise ways of improving them. Training programs should be evaluated in terms of whether (1) there is a perceived need for the program; (2) it is properly focused for the audience; (3) the sponsor and speakers are credible to the audience; (4) the program is offered at a convenient time; (5) the location is popular, convenient, and economical; (6) the price match is right for the audience and program; (7) the promotion is adequate; (8) mailings were sent to the right people; and (9) the program is differentiated from competing programs. Although these questions are best answered in the planning phase of a program, they can also be asked in retrospect and used as the basis for improving the program's chances for a positive reception by attendees. (MN)

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TECHNIQUES

What To Do If They Don't Like Your Program

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What a wonderful opportunity to make a friend! Most meeting providers are really tough about refunds. If you are too, I urge you to reconsider both your policy and the style or techniques you use to handle unsatisfied attendees. Here are some of the issues you should examine:

1. *Have you given attendees the opportunity to express dissatisfaction?* An evaluation form is the standard technique (as long as it is not anonymous). An accessible key person, such as the program director, moderator or executive director, is also helpful. In other words, there has to be a "relief valve" available.

2. *Do you follow up immediately and personally?* The sooner contact is made the better the impression you will make. Allowing a person to " stew " builds up resentment and hostility. It also shows a lack of professionalism. And personal contact, preferably by phone, will go a long way to soothe unhappy attendees. It's amazing how many people are so surprised and flattered by the personal contact that they end up saying, "It wasn't that bad but I'm glad you called. . . thank you. I'm really impressed."

3. *Do you make an honest, full-fledged attempt to find out what went wrong?* Was it a particular speaker? Was too much promised in the brochure? Was it too basic or advanced? Was it the facility?

Whatever the cause, don't be defensive! Find out why this person is not satisfied. That's your first goal. Then you can decide what you want to do about it.

4. *How far are you willing to go to make this person happy?* If your answer isn't "I'll do whatever it takes," then you've got a problem. People are basically reasonable. . . surprisingly so. Why not be reasonable with them. Give them what they want. Remember: they invested a lot of time attending your program.

5. *Give them options!* Here are a few that can make sense:

- "We want happy satisfied attendees. Please attend another session (or program) as my guest. If you're not 100% satisfied, I'll be delighted to refund your registration fee."

- Same as above, but allow them to send another person.

- Would you like a refund? Total or partial? Let them make the choice. And handle them in a caring way.

6. *Who is an unsatisfied attendees?* If your answer is, "Anyone who wants a refund," you're missing an opportunity to make friends and influence people. On a scale of "excellent," "good," "satisfactory" and "unsatisfactory," I would call everyone who rated the program as "unsatisfactory" or "satisfactory" and use the same techniques. Try it. You'll find you will not only make many new friends, but you will actually refund less money. It's truly a win/win situation.

The answer to the question, "What to do when they want their money back" is "Whatever it takes." But talk to them quickly, non-defensively, and with total understanding and empathy for their point of view. A side benefit. . . you will get a lot of good information on how to do a better program next time.

Nine Key Questions to Evaluate Program Potential

Not every program offered is immediately successful and some never will be. When you have a program you are not completely happy with, what do you do? The first thing to do is an objective, intensive

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and comprehensive analysis. Here are nine key questions you should ask yourself.

1. Is there a perceived need for the program? Does your audience know and want the program? Or do you feel they need it?
2. Is the program properly focused for the audience? Is it 100%, 60% or 20% relevant to each attendee? Or is it too broad in scope or level?
3. Are the sponsor and speakers credible to the audience? Or are they unknown or second-rate?
4. Is the program offered at a convenient time(s) and format for the audience? Or was it convenient for speakers and staff? Too long? Too short? Proper participation?
5. Is the location one the audience wants to be at? Or is it convenient and/or economical for you?
6. Is the price match right for the audience and program? Or is it too high (audience not able to attend), or too low (audience perceives low quality)?
7. Is the promotion right? Or was it not often enough, without ample notice, not designed to get through, without benefits, unprofessional, wrong image, poorly positioned without recognizing an approval would be required?
8. Did you mail to the right people? Or did you try to reach geographical areas that couldn't come, depressed industries, irrelevant titles, companies not directly interested because of size or activity?
9. Have you differentiated yourself from competitive programs? Or are you a "me too" without distinction?

These are the questions. Of course, you should (and probably did) ask them during your planning phase. Now ask them in retrospect... but not just of yourself. Ask your potential audience (or members). Ask your speakers or instructors. Ask your staff. Ask your Advisory Board (you do have one, don't you?). And keep your mind open (remember it didn't succeed your way).

Now for the good news... if you came anywhere near your goals or breaking even the first time, you will be successful the next time because you will put together the right program.

But if everything done was right on target and you can't find any significant changes to make, you've probably got a loser that should be dropped.

When you come up with another program with a similar profile... avoid it.
